

**How To BBQ A Comedy The UT Way: The Writing Of
*Club Fed***

by

Kevin Jeffrey Pinkerton, B.A.

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The Thesis Report Committee for Kevin Jeffrey Pinkerton
Certifies that this is the approved version of the
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APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Stuart Kelban

Richard Lewis

Abstract

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Kevin Jeffrey Pinkerton

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Supervisor: Stuart Kelban

In this thesis report I describe in detail the conception of a fictional story set in present-day Florida and the Caribbean and its development as a screenplay, the University of Texas Graduate School learning environment that facilitated this writing exercise, and my reflections on the MFA process as a whole.

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Chapter One: The Easy Decision

"It was that rarity, an easy decision." So reads the last line of Jonathan Lethem's mind-bending debut novel, *Gun, with Occasional Music*, a personal favorite. While reflecting back on my two years at The University of Texas, and my home and haunts in Austin, it sprang to mind as the best way to describe how I came to be a part of the UT Graduate School. It was, indeed, one of the easiest, wisest decisions I have ever made. This Thesis Report will examine that decision, plus my time in the RTF Graduate Program in general, and my process, in greater specificity, detailing the writing of my MFA thesis script.

"And you may ask yourself: 'Well - how did I get here?'" - David Byrne, "Once In A Lifetime"

When I began my undergraduate coursework at The University of Alabama I was only thinking of my immediate goal. While my wife was working on her PhD, I could be with her in Tuscaloosa, pursuing my BA in Film Production. For the first person in my family to ever even attend college, a BA seemed like a noteworthy end unto itself. Midway through my enrollment at UA I was nominated for a McNair Scholarship, and that experience

alone changed my outlook entirely. The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Scholars Program posits graduate school as its ultimate aim for participants - Masters level at the least, Doctoral as the ideal. McNair Scholars are mentored on a level not usually found in an undergrad program, and given the tools and encouragement to transition to Graduate school: research experience, writing for journal publication, GRE prep, etc. A new horizon opened up before me. I knew the MFA was the terminal degree for my field, but which Graduate Program to choose?

I'd already heard about Austin, in the kind of enthusiastic conversations film and music geeks have about places with thriving "scenes". It was widely accepted among my friends that Austin was a kind of "third coast" for filmmakers. Exciting projects were brewing there with hometown Austin heroes like Robert Rodriguez and Richard Linklater, larger-than-life guys who seemed closer to our Indie world than the Spielbergs and Scorseses. Quentin Tarantino had been prowling Austin's streets; hell, even Mike Judge had set up shop there. But it wasn't until one of my pals at UA declared he was moving there, then packed up and put his money where his mouth was, that I actually considered The University of Texas. It wasn't just idle

talk anymore; Austin was teleported into the realm of possibility.

So much seemed to line up in favor of Austin, as in my opening quote, like planets in rare orbits. Unlike attending a Left or Right Coast school, I could take some comfort in minimizing culture shock, knowing Texas was, technically, still "The South". UT was coincidentally the Alma Mater of the dean of my college at UA, and when I spoke with him he extolled at length how Austin was green and beautiful, unlike much of Texas, and how easy the drive was from Alabama (on the latter he was only exaggerating, not really lying outright, but on the former he was dead-on). I'd actually *know* some people there, who in turn knew the city, so we wouldn't be moving to a strange place with zero connections. And, oh yes, before I forget, the film department had a first-rate reputation.

All I had to do, then, was to get accepted.

Here's a secret: I never applied anywhere else. I wanted to go to UT so much, had I been rejected, I was going to take it as a sign I should regroup, refocus before I considered applying again there or elsewhere. You could say I put all my eggs in one basket, but I prefer to think I was determined. Or crazy. George Bernard Shaw makes that memorable case for insanity, however: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the

world; the unreasonable persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man." Take that, Reason!

My decision wasn't without some forethought, of course. Though my BA was in Production, I felt I couldn't realistically consider the MFA Production track at UT. Even though I felt I had some talent (and requisite cast-iron stomach) for making films, I believed that producing pre- and thesis films would be too much of a financial burden. From sharing war stories at UT with those who did choose that track, some of that perception seems justified, and some was overinflated. But I didn't lose any sleep over it; I had already come to enjoy the writing of my short films more than the often-arduous task of shooting them.

Having realized that, I also knew I had taken my prior screenwriting education as far as it could go. The University of Alabama only offered one real screenwriting course at that time, and it was in the English Department. I loved it so much I talked the prof into letting me take his class twice, basically for no credit, just so I could benefit from the guided discipline of writing another feature.

It was, as you might expect, somewhat different from the Intro Screenwriting class at UT. The entire class at UA was the size of one discussion section at

UT; but in my TA sections at UT, I found the students to be more committed, so the workshops were livelier and more productive. My second go-round was just Dr. Wolfe and I, thrashing out one script like writing partners, so I can now see the enormous benefit of that sort of relationship.

All in all, I felt like I had a solid foundation in screenwriting; not many people I knew had finished one feature-length screenplay, let alone two. One script even got some decent feedback from the Slamdance Festival in 2005, and I felt emboldened by that. Of course, it isn't until you gain enough knowledge that you are truly able to appreciate your ignorance. Maybe it was naïve enthusiasm, but I thought I had an excellent shot at UT.

I boxed up my thriller, threw in an unsolicited copy of my comedy for good measure, schlepped them down to FedEx, and off they sped to Austin. And I waited. I can't say I wasn't a little anxious, having basically one shot, but anyone with any experience in Production knows there isn't time to be too concerned about how the wind is going to blow, over the charnel house or the bread factory. I had projects with impossible deadlines, and somehow, in the middle of scrambling to execute them, I received one of those magical calls that changed my life.

You know the rest, right? The same story's told daily around a pitcher on a rickety table out back of the Hole In The Wall. I can still remember Orientation, sitting on that folding chair in Studio 4-E listening to Charles Ramirez-Berg's uplifting speech about how he turned his life (and car) around from a career in Medicine, and chose "Film" instead (hearts swell, heavens part, I *felt* it) - right before Stuart Kelban showed us the scene from *The Player* where a hapless screenwriter winds up murdered in a shallow pool of water, in some grimy Pasadena alleyway. I suppose film school is suspended somewhere between those aspirations and realities (some not so grim, I'm still breathing, for now). The best part of it all, from my perspective: I had the opportunity to dig in and do some screenwriting.

Chapter Two: The Writing of *Club Fed*

I wrote three features at The University of Texas: a hallucinatory sci-fi/action-thriller, a rock-n-roll period spy piece, and a dark comedy. In between I also adapted a short story, cooked up a TV pilot and wrote a spec script for *Californication* that got me in the semifinals of the Austin Film Festival in 2008. Though this checklist is much the same for my cohort in the MFA Screenwriting program, the specifics for each our experiences could not have been more different - and taking it a step further, the writing of each of our own scripts seems to have taken a unique and often serpentine path to completion.

In this next chapter of the Thesis Report, I'd like to chart the odd, often painful, but ultimately edifying process I undertook to write one of those projects, which I selected to be my Thesis script. I submit for your approval a look - maybe not behind Oz's curtain, but his poppy-field laptop screen - at the feature I wrote in the spring of 2009, the aforementioned dark comedy, my *Club Fed*.

The care and feeding of *Club Fed*

This is the tale of a tale. Writing about writing is a bizarre undertaking, especially concerning one's own work; it's a Möbius strip, a solipsism. Then again, the Tower requirement for this report seems designed to investigate if/how my learning experience at The University of Texas made the writing of this particular script different in some way. That it did.

How I usually approach a script, probably like many other writers, is to circle in from the outer fringes first with an over-arching idea, the proverbial *Cuadro Grande*, usually pretty nebulous. I try then to imagine characters on a collision course with that larger idea, and invariably it winds up as someone in the best position to be pummeled by it. Only then can I cobble a plot together out of the elements to hit the right marks.

That's not to say the structure is the least important part, quite the contrary. If it's one thing my mentors and classmates at UT taught me, it doesn't matter how "great" an idea is in the beginning, if it doesn't work within the proper structure and yet seem organic, not formulaic, it won't make it to FADE OUT in any satisfying way, if at all. The work done up front

is invaluable; the writing of this screenplay, *Club Fed*, is a textbook example. Re-working the most basic elements in workshop over and over again, taking time to build the right structure and not rush to pages, was key in making it a successful experience to write, and hopefully, to read and enjoy.

Club Fed is one of those screenplays that almost wasn't; my original intention was to write quite another kind of script for RTF380M in spring 2009, something tentatively titled *The Corvette Club*. The premise involved a guy not unlike Terry Leather of *The Bank Job*, a struggling ex-con mechanic, who gets involved in a kind of time-share of a pricey classic car with a cabal of his erstwhile high-school pals. Turns out he's actually being set up by the richest member of his old crew, who wants a dirt-nap divorce from his wife so he can be with his mistress, the protag's ex-lover. A body winds up in the trunk, as bodies do, and our hero ends up on the lam across the Texas back-roads, framed for murder. Oh, and I wanted it to be a comedy.

When I pitched the idea to Richard Lewis at the end of fall semester, I framed it as a dark comedy, not a thriller, something left of *Blood Simple*. Richard astutely pointed out it didn't sound very funny - and

the more I talked it out it was obvious it was beyond dark, it was downright obsidian, so I shelved it. I was dead-set on writing a comedy, but just as determined it needed to have an edge to it. It was finding the balance that was the trick.

"Comedy is Tragedy Plus Time." - Josef Stalin

No, just kidding, that was Carol Burnett. I thought it might be funny if I attributed that quote to one of the greatest mass-murderers of all time, instead of a comedian. Working the tragedy angle in an ironic way - see? That's comedy! Or rather, it wouldn't have been funny at all if that bastard Stalin had said it. But that's what makes it funny when you read it! My head throbs just thinking about the twisted logic. "Drama" gets handed all the gold naked men at awards time, but to me, comedy is a million times harder to write. There are crucial differences that make it so.

The *Corvette Club* plot was full of bad things happening to good people, which makes it *seem* like the stuff of tragedy, but that's also the basis for comedy. To me, the critical difference can be illustrated by this example: if you see a guy walk into a sliding-glass door and fall down, it's kind of funny (in a mildly sadistic way). If it happened to you, it would

be painful. If he walked *through* the glass, was cut to bloody shreds and rushed to the emergency room, it wouldn't be funny at all, unless you were Stalin. At the same time, if he walked up to the glass, saw it was there, and avoided it, no humor. Comedy has to have the precise amount of tragedy applied, but with the voyeur's understanding that the victim has the wherewithal to survive it somehow. I guess in the final analysis, it's Einsteinian, everything's relative.

The Recipe

Over the holidays, I kicked around all sorts of scenarios that I could exploit for just this kind of slaphappy darkness. During this time, my wife was transcribing the research interviews for her social work dissertation. The recordings were of aged male convicts, mainly telling their experiences with the prison health-care system, but with some of their life stories provided as background. These men had committed all manner of crimes, and came from all walks of life; some were illiterate thugs, while others were charming sociopaths.

I was intrigued by one prisoner's self-assured declaration that he was just biding time behind bars, making bank the whole while with shrewd investments,

and that he'd be far richer when he got out than when he went in. Also around this time, the Bernie Madoff scandal was first hitting the news, and I thought, "What if one of these guys, like the Enron types, simply set up an impending prison stint as a way to ride out the recession, while they had millions stashed somewhere?" The trick would be to arrange to make your prison stay as painless as possible. This, like any other little problem in life that bedevils the ordinary shmoe, is an easy fix for the wealthy and powerful. I'd seen it in action, years before.

I grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, home to one of the infamous Club Feds, minimum security federal prisons where "special" white collar criminals like Madoff (or elite tax-fraud artists, disgraced lawmakers, select Watergate conspirators, etc.) were sent to do soft time. (An aside - I actually dated a girl in Atlanta whose father had been a Federal Judge in Alabama - he had been involved in an embezzlement scheme with an accountant in Birmingham, stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars, until it blew up in their faces. My girlfriend's dad went to prison in Georgia, while his accomplice committed suicide over the scandal. The reason I bring this up is, the ex-judge wound up forging documents from inside that Georgia prison to have himself *transferred* to the Club

Fed in Montgomery - it was that sweet of a place. He was there for a month before they found out, and hauled him back to Atlanta. He wound up climbing the walls for six months in solitary as punishment. But I digress.)

Club Fed was more of a country club than a prison, with tennis courts, a duck pond, laughable security. One of my friends taught tennis lessons there, and a tanned, toned con told him they had everything but hard liquor (and that could be had with minimally greased palms). They drank cold beer, worked on their backhand, lay around the pool and read books from the nearby Air Force base library, and were given passes to take classes at the local college (mainly to shag co-eds in the lockable library "study rooms"). A harried ex-CEO of a Fortune 500 company could do far worse for a vacation, let alone pay back society for a federal crime.

This germ of an idea, to me, the non-prison-prison, was in line with the comedy concept I mentioned earlier, danger and safety intertwined; at least I felt there was enough of a mix of pathos and humor that I could find a funny story in there somewhere. I imagined a character could be sent there hoping to stay, but much to his dismay, he's forced to break out. This is the way I described the world of the screenplay when I presented it to the class:

The World of Club Fed:

Most of the story takes place in the Gulf Coast region of the Southeastern US, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.

Act one quickly moves to a "Club Fed" style prison, so-named because inmates liken it to a low-rent version of Club Med, the famous resort. Club Fed (the most famous example being Eglin AFB in Florida, now closed) is a minimum-security prison reserved for mostly white-collar non-violent crime such as embezzlement or tax evasion.

The majority of the second and third acts take place in the tropical region of the Gulf of Mexico – clean white sand, crystal clear waters, blue skies. Many communities along the coast exist in a kind of time warp, with island and bayou dwellers cut off from greater society. From the Gulf Coast of Florida it is easily possible to sail to The Caymans, Cancun, the Bahamas, etc.

Our protagonist's final destination, Grand Cayman Island, is still in many places an idyllic scenic vacation spot, but the Cayman Islands were hit hard by Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and have not fully recovered.

The Cayman Islands were at one time (2002) at the top of an international list of notorious money laundering sites, as it is nearly impossible to extradite felons and there is almost nonexistent oversight of financial transactions (in all fairness the Caymans are making demonstrable strides to shake off this tarnished reputation). The Caymans are now at #5 on the list, behind other Caribbean locations, but only due to increased cooperation with the US government, not because of a lack of criminal activity.

Because, I didn't want to write a prison comedy exactly, you see. I was more interested in how a tight-assed protagonist might be shaken up enough by such a comically traumatic experience that they embark on a

kind of escape from themselves, becoming transformed through such a journey by the end of the script.

I always liked the progression of locations in the movie *Captain Ron* (see it, I swear it is an unfairly maligned classic): it begins in chilly, drab Chicago, with a yuppie couple mired in soulless economic pursuits, and ends up in a super-saturated Caribbean paradise, with the heroes free from the shackles of their old lives. Club Fed is such a great place, though, relatively speaking, I didn't know how to make it compelling as plot element. I wouldn't realize until much later that it probably *needed* the contrast of a real prison to bring out the humor, just as the Caribbean needed Chicago.

At this early stage, I thought the specter of prison could be used ironically as a liberating device. I was reminded of another old favorite, the oddly charming *Rancho Deluxe*, where the title refers to a dream shared by the two protagonists - a modern-day Cowboy and Indian - who make ends meet by poaching livestock with a high-powered rifle, all the while longing to be mythic "Marlboro Men" who can afford their own vast spread. Only after Jeff Bridges and Sam Waterston run afoul of the law trying to steal their way to their dream do they wind up sentenced to a

Montana prison ranch, tending to hundreds of acres of wilderness - with more freedom than ever before.

Club Fed then, like Rancho Deluxe, is a prison that's more of a sanctuary from an oppressive "free" world. My idea was crystallizing: a crooked businessman uses Club Fed as a safe haven while he waits to recover some stolen money hidden in the Cayman Islands, so I get my Caribbean paradise element. Where's the conflict, then? What would drive the characters on their journey? I thought comedy could come from conflict if my protagonist arranges to have himself thrown in Club Fed, then finds out someone is stealing his secret island stash, forcing him to try and escape and outwit/outrun someone to recover it - a mix of a somewhat subverted prison comedy, and *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. So I pitched the idea, and was given the go-ahead by Richard and my cohort. The one-pager I turned in the next week, however, must have been different than anyone had imagined from my logline:

Club Fed One-Pager

Our middle-aged protag starts off despicable: a low-level Enron exec type who hates his life but doesn't know why. He's been chasing money so long he has become estranged from his trophy wife and his son (kid is fresh out of college, thinking he has to be cold and greedy just like his dad). Facing ruin in the present economic climate, and jail time due to the crackdown on corporate crime, our hero engineers (with his lawyer and \$) a 5-year prison stay at a Club Fed facility in

Florida. He thinks he'll coast through the economic downturn in a resort-like environment while his money is safe offshore in the Bahamas; when he gets to Club Fed he finds the mediocre "prison resort" lifestyle is a comically ugly mirror of his former life. His now-bitter son is sentenced to the same place, and there they meet a motley crew of other white-collar criminals.

He finds out his lawyer is siphoning off his secret Grand Cayman account, and has run off with his wife. He hatches a plan to bust out of the Club Fed prison (not really hard to do, I would imagine) along with his son and the wacky crew, and get to Grand Cayman to stop the lawyer from wiping him out of \$. Meanwhile, they are pursued by a female investigator who will wind up as the love interest a la "Out of Sight"/"Thomas Crown Affair".

Since they have no passports and are on the run, our hero turns out of desperation to his estranged father, a destitute eccentric living on the Gulf Coast, who has a big old sailboat. They sail to the Cayman Islands, along the way having crazy adventures. Of course, the whole journey changes everybody for the better, for the most part, and they really start living life instead of being corporate drones. By the time they meet up with the evil lawyer (who represents a kind of doppelganger of the main character's old life at this point) the money/old life/wife are no longer the point. Maybe they find a way to use the \$ for some altruistic end, and the main guy has to go back to prison, but now has a better life waiting for him when he gets out.

The protagonist wasn't sympathetic (which was my point, I thought), and nobody seemed to care about either the son or the father (I saw the script as a kind of generational thing, at first). There was a subplot involving the father's secret cancer, and in general it was more of a downer than anyone wanted to

read. I was frustrated at having to go back to the drawing board; but even I had to admit it wasn't funny, and could reasonably be spun as more of a melodrama with little effort. I was stubbornly convinced I was on the right track, however, that I knew what the screenplay would look and sound like, if only everyone else could just see it my way.

One of my biggest problems was that I tried to carry over a screenwriting aid I had employed from Bob Foshko's class the semester before: I cast the film in my head, and it made it so easy to write scenes. With *Club Fed*, I was locked into thinking perhaps George Clooney could play the protagonist, Charlie Malthrop, at least in the reels that unspooled in my mind, with Robert Duval playing the geezer of a dad. I quickly learned that, almost universally, everyone thought a Clooney-esque character was too old.

I tried to appreciate all I would gain by changing the ages, and how it might solve some of problems. I had not yet sussed out what Charlie would "do" to make his fortune; almost immediately, it became clear that a younger main character would allow his business to be "younger" as well, and in this case, with a suggestion from Richard it evolved into a

Napster-style music-sharing software biz. So, going younger was looking like an easy fix.

The problem was, I wanted there to be a family in place as a kind of shorthand, so I didn't have to waste too much time explaining relationships that I planned on quickly smashing with betrayal anyway. Once I shook myself of the notion of an older main character, I knew I could lose the son.

The next logical family relationship then, to my way of thinking, was to pit brother against brother. Also, I wanted to have the victims of the shady businessman be represented, and with the switch to the Napster biz (in my script, Earwig) I now had my antagonist, the psychotic wronged rapper Travis-T. So I thought I had a grip on it, and I turned in a revised, expanded outline. This is a mutated second cousin to the finished draft, but perhaps worth reading if one wishes to see what bits of chromosomal DNA were passed on to the next amphibian generation:

Step Outline for *Club Fed*

1. Charlie Malthrop (late 20s) works the grill in back of his McMansion. Charlie's the CEO of Earwig, a file-sharing web biz that just went public, glued to his blackberry and laptop 24/7. His high-maintenance wife Sabrina and his brother Dennis (a type-A clone of Charlie) and Dennis' vapid starlet girlfriend all congregate in the

backyard along with a couple dozen of Charlie's snobby neighbors.

Rapper Travis-T crashes the party, angry that Charlie's company has made his hit single "Gettin' Paid" the most pirated song in the country (a running gag is that literally every cell ringtone heard in the film is "Gettin' Paid", and every time you hear it, Travis ain't).

Charlie's security throws Travis out. This, along with constant monitoring of his stocks, causes Charlie's attention to stray from the grill. The flames rise.

The tension culminates with a call from Charlie's lawyer, Nick Remora, telling him he has "insider" info that Earwig is about to come under investigation from the SEC. Charlie feels the onset of a heart attack. Just before he collapses, he tells the lawyer Remora to "Do it," and accidentally knocks the grill over.

Charlie's house goes up in flames. The guests scatter.

2. Charlie wakes up in the hospital a couple days later. His doctors tell him he's got to take it easy, or risk another heart attack. He's ordered to take a vacation. Earwig is all over the news, the poster child of economic ruin in the US. Charlie checks out, and proceeds as calmly as possible to Earwig's offices.

3. Angry stockholders form a mob around Earwig's offices. We learn Charlie's instruction to "Do it" meant to sell all his stock, which caused Earwig shares to plummet.

When Charlie enters Earwig, he struggles to remain calm, as all around him the workers shred documents like mad, and bash hard drives in with sledgehammers. Charlie ignores them all and walks to his office, where he retrieves a huge half-finished model sailboat in a bottle. Sirens approach outside.

When Charlie walks out clutching his boat model, SEC agents and cops slap him in cuffs.

4. Charlie goes to trial, and faces 20 years for securities fraud. With bribes, this gets reduced to 5 years in a Minimum Security prison. Remora assures him in private that his money is safe, \$497 million in an offshore Grand Cayman account. Charlie just wants to get away clean, and have a break from it all.

Remora arranges for Charlie to be transferred to a "Club Fed" style prison, almost like a cheap resort. Charlie almost seems relieved to "escaping" from the stress. His brother, however, is not so happy, as he's ruined. Charlie tries to reassure Dennis he'll take care of him, and the brother is sent to the same Club Fed, over his objections (he understandably hates Charlie at this point).

5. Charlie and Dennis arrive in Club Fed in Florida. They quickly learn it is almost worse than a "real" prison - it's like the Twilight Zone episode where the guy goes to Hell but thinks it's Heaven (at first) because it's a non-stop party. Club Fed, however, is like being stuck at the lamest all-inclusive resort on earth - and at the end of the day no real freedom. The warden, Shale, has no love for the white-collar assholes in his care, and quickly makes this clear to Charlie and Dennis. They try to make the best of it, since they'll be stuck there for five long years.

6. Charlie's only visitor from outside is Federal investigator Caitlyn Cross, who has been after Charlie for some time to rat out his insider trading buddies.

Now she's after him to reveal where he hid the money. While there is some sexual tension between them, Charlie stonewalls her on testifying, because he steadfastly believes he will coast through Club Fed and come out the backside with millions waiting.

7. Charlie meets several of the "lifers" at Club Fed, various losers and criminal types from the corporate world. He makes a couple friends in Lester and Ray. With no cell phone, Charlie thinks he'll be free of the stress, but his mug is plastered all over TV, and he's one of the most hated men in America, so he's kind of high profile.

8. This, combined with being low man in the hierarchy at the prison, mean there are plenty of cons that want to fuck with him and Dennis. Charlie tries to blow it all off and work on his model boat (with some difficulty, as Charlie doesn't know shit about boats).

Dennis' temper gets him in hot water with the reigning cons, so Charlie steps in and half-ass defends his brother - which leads to Charlie going into solitary; when he gets out, his half-finished boat has been taken away.

9. Just when it looks like it couldn't get worse, Charlie learns (indirectly via Caitlyn) that lawyer Remora and ex-wife Sabrina have gone to Grand Cayman, and are trying to siphon off his secret account.

10. Now desperate, Charlie hatches a plan to bust out of Club Fed, and save his money. He recruits Lester and Ray easily, but his brother is a hard sell. Problem is, true to his word, Charlie has included Dennis on the account, and can't get the money unless Dennis is there to sign for it with him.

Dennis is finally taken (mostly against his will) and the final piece of the puzzle falls into place when Charlie and the gang recruit

Griff, a Club Fed guard (and the testosterone-fueled "muscle" of the group).

11. Charlie's gang pulls off the comically easily (but of course, comically mishandled) escape from Club Fed.

12. Travis-T hears about the escape on the news, and figures this is his chance to get revenge. He and his sidekick Crusher set off in pursuit of Charlie.

13. Caitlyn also learns of the escape, and figures this is her chance to track Charlie to his secret stash of cash. Being privy to more info (not to mention being a hundred IQ points smarter) than Travis, she picks up Charlie's trail much faster. Her plan is to hang back, in the end acting almost like Charlie's guardian angel, so he can actually get to the money before he's captured. Then she'll nab him.

14. Now on the run, Charlie realizes he has no real plan as to how to get to Grand Cayman, and zero criminal skills. Since none of them have a passport, and every port and airport in the US is watching for Charlie, he decides to try and find his estranged father, Gil, an old eccentric living on the Gulf Coast.

Gil does NOT want to help Charlie, but feels some sympathy for Dennis, so he's roped into going along. As we will discover later, Gil may not be long for this world, so this might be his last chance to reconcile with Charlie.

15. Along the way, Griff becomes too scary and controlling, and Charlie & Co. ditch him. Now add Griff to the wildcard pursuers. The gang manages to set sail, however, without Griff on board Gil's 50-foot sailboat, the Dedalus.

As we learn from Lester and Ray, Papa Gil was once a Warren Buffet-like figure, author of a how-to-stay-rich best-seller ("Turn Around, The Knife Goes In Easier") before he dropped out of society, and he and Charlie haven't spoken for years.

16. On Grand Cayman Island, Charlie's lawyer Remora is learning that Sabrina is a hard pill to swallow, even though she's a babe. She's costing him a fortune as he's holed up in a swanky hotel, working on getting control of Charlie's money.

More and more, Remora becomes a doppelganger of the life Charlie would have led. As Remora learns Charlie has escaped, the pressure builds for him to find a way to steal the money.

17. Caitlyn has a boat ready to pursue them, but Travis, Crusher and Griff "kidnap" her (i.e. she goes along with them because that way she can keep an eye on the bad guys). We aren't really afraid of Travis (except in a maniacal Tracy

Morgan way) or Crusher (despite his name) but Griff is damn near psychotic, so Caitlyn has to stay on her toes.

18. Along the way, Charlie and Dennis loosen up a little, as they learn more of why their dad gave up money altogether (he lives in a "barter" world now, cash-free) and we are able to see that Lester and Ray have been wasting their lives as well, chasing the corporate Brass Ring.

Stuffy people + boat trip to the Caribbean = enlightenment. There is some kind of fleeting radio communication between Caitlyn and Charlie at some point in here.

19. Charlie somehow gets them off course, however, and they wind up in Cuba. Charlie and Gil exchange bitter words and reopen old wounds. (Charlie feels Gil abandoned them when they were young.) Caitlyn becomes worried about Charlie and crew (we really begin to see her feelings for him), and ditches her captors to try and rescue Charlie, winding up caught herself.

20. After a madcap scramble to escape the Cuban authorities (Lester gets nabbed with a load of contraband, and they have to leave him behind) and stay one step ahead of Travis & crew, Charlie, Dennis, Caitlyn, and Ray wind up back on The Dedalus.

Travis and crew capture Gil, but Gil tells Charlie to follow his heart. Charlie tells Travis they can "keep the old man", so Travis' threat of extortion doesn't work. Charlie sails on to Grand Cayman, believing his original goal to be the true one, even though we know he's made the wrong choice.

Travis and crew force Gil to serve as their new "captain" and follow.

21. The whole cast winds up at Grand Cayman, and since they are coming from the water into the low-lying non-touristy areas, we see that the island is still suffering from the devastation of recent hurricanes.

Dennis is moved by the story of a local girl and her work to restore the island and provide aid for the locals, in a kind of love-at-first sight moment; Charlie, Caitlyn and Ray race to track down Remora.

22. Remora and Charlie have a final showdown where Charlie manages to get the money (utilizing Ray's financial wizardry), and Remora and Sabrina get what's coming to them.

23. Remora and Sabrina have to appear to be a rich married couple to get the money, and this attracts the attention of Jamaican drug lords, who kidnap them to ransom them off - not knowing a) they have no money and b) they have no friends/family that want them back.

So they're screwed, tied up in a warehouse together at the end waiting for a phone call that will never come.

24. Once Charlie gets the money, he is put in the position of using it to save Gil. Charlie realizes this is the right thing to do, and Travis/Crusher are all for it, but Griff is convinced there is more money to be had (maybe they lie to him in the beginning to get him to go along, feeding him a larger number than the actual Grand Cayman account.).

In the ensuing battle, Charlie and Gil reconcile, but it is too much for Gil's heart to take, and he dies (not before letting Charlie know he did the right thing, and he is proud of him for not turning out to be an asshole).

Somehow the money (which has now been converted to a big, ugly pile of cash) winds up getting destroyed, and Griff along with it (maybe his greed makes him sloppy and he inadvertently does himself in).

25. The twist is, Gil was actually sitting on an even BIGGER fortune than Charlie, and leaves it all to his sons (the mom having long since passed away).

Also, instead of costing Travis money, in the end, the widespread popularity of "Gettin' Paid: The Ringtone" winds up securing Travis a new multimillion-dollar revenue stream in the mobile phone industry, based on his next single, "Sprunktastic".

26. Dennis decides to stay behind in Grand Cayman and help his new island girlfriend rebuild the local community (using much of his money for charity). Of course, he is not going to be hurting for dough the rest of his life, and we should see he is living a kind of island dream by the end.

27. Caitlyn and Gil's positive influence on Charlie convinces him to testify against all his old insider trading accomplices, and give his share of the money back to the Earwig stockholders he stole from.

He appears in court in a suit and tie but with actual color in his cheeks from his adventure.

In the end, he goes back to prison (not Club Fed this time) to serve out his sentence, but with the knowledge Caitlyn is waiting for him, and will visit him. Plus, maybe there's a few million left over from dear old dad.

28. When we leave him, Charlie is in his plain gray cell, surrounded by several new examples of his boats in bottles - as he carefully tinkers on his shining achievement, a perfect replica of the Dedalus.

This was progress, I thought. Looking back, I was technically right, yet so, so wrong. The problems with this outline are many, and seem obvious in hindsight: too many characters, too many extraneous scenes or details that distract from the main, comic plot, etc., the list goes on. But I expected that. What I wasn't prepared for, but what I heard emphatically in workshop, was that the main character was damnably unsympathetic. I could see the value in consolidating characters, simplifying the plot, and lots of other points, but I was determined to begin the script with an ass of a main character, and turn him around by the climax.

I submitted another outline, and another, each time with major changes. Notes from my classmates and Richard eventually convinced me the more interesting relationship was between Charlie and his betrayed brother, not between them and their estranged dad. So I cut the father from the plot and transferred a lot of ideas for the father to a Morgan Freeman-esque con at Club Fed (I read quite a few classic prison movie scripts for research, and *The Shawshank Redemption* is in a league of its own). This left me with some plot elements that had come unmoored without the father, but I assumed I'd find a way to reel them back in. The

bigger problem was, I'd still burdened myself with a despicable protagonist, who victimized his younger brother, and none of the readers could get past that. I tried to address this, but it was really just rearranging swizzle sticks on the *Titanic*.

Since the class saw many elements from brother's story as more interesting and sympathetic, I shifted them over to the protagonist. Unfortunately, they were mostly ancillary to the story, not integral. For instance, Dennis' insanely demanding supermodel wife became Charlie's, because the main character needed that conflict more. But how could someone reflecting on that situation *not* feel that Charlie deserved to get shafted by her? It's counter-productive to grease the rails for an audience to want bad things to happen to a protagonist! The characters were merging, but I held a hard line on making Charlie a "good" guy.

It cost me time, effort and stomach lining; the rest of the class was moving into pages, and I was growing increasingly frustrated. I felt I was being unfairly criticized each week for willing to gamble on some atypical choices, while some "simple" stories in class were rocketing along. I was getting hung up on looking everywhere to fix the problem but within my own head. Maybe I could have hammered the old script into shape, eventually, in some fashion; the truth is, the

early choices were DOA wrong for the kind of script I wanted to write. Richard, and my cohort, were right, and I finally started to see it. Asshole Charlie needed to become nice-guy Dennis, and vice versa.

I revised the character bios, and made another pass at a step outline:

Club Fed Revised Step Outline/Character Bios

Charlie is more of what Dennis was in the beginning: he's the nice guy, the younger brother, who developed Earwig. He embarks on a life of crime only because circumstances screw him so badly. We should get the sense he and Caitlyn were two peas in a pod, meant to be together, but never got the chance where the time was right.

Dennis is more like the old Charlie, the flashy, greedy, manipulator, who takes advantage of his brother and has to have a change of heart through the story.

Caitlyn has had a thing for Charlie since business school, but they never acted on it, and now she's the "bad guy" in his circle, working for the SEC taking down businesses. Since Charlie is (lovelessly) married to Ursula, Caitlyn and Charlie have all this sexual tension, but only in the course of the story do they get to be together.

Knox is the anti-Morgan Freeman in a real prison, not Club Fed, not a mythically wise figure but a kind of con artist and asshole, who nonetheless comes to have sympathy for the poor schlub Charlie.

Travis, Ursula, and Griffey basically the same. No Remora per se, but he's the head of Dennis' Dream team.

The main new character is **Dimitri**, a jaded, middle-aged businessman who has gone too far down the insider trading path to get out, and acts as a kind of mentor in the opener to Charlie the rising entrepreneur.

Act One

1. Charlie drives to work in his Prius, on the phone with his demanding wife Ursula, reassuring her he will not blow the biggest day in his company's short life - a big morning meeting about a buyout for millions.

He meets Dimitri in his boat of a Benz at the parking garage. Dimitri commends Charlie on his company's success, tries (jokingly, knowing Charlie's straight-laced nature) to extract insider info, but Charlie refuses politely, wanting to keep biz on up-and-up.

Dimitri encourages Charlie not to take life so seriously, live a little before it's too late - "when you see a door opening, go through it." Someday he'll be the guy in the Benz, but Charlie says he can't see himself that way, though Ursula sure can. They make pact they will never be "the guy who jumps off a ledge." when the business tanks.

They see Caitlyn outside their building, Dimitri doesn't want to answer any SEC questions so he dodges her and goes inside.

2. Charlie shows sparks w/Caitlyn (you can see she feels the same) but she's trying to be professional, worried for Charlie: the SEC at that minute is upstairs seizing Dimitri's files and she wants to know if he and Dennis are involved in insider trading, as Dimitri just bought a lot of Earwig stock.

She's risking her job just telling him. Charlie defends his bro, but Dennis drives up in a new Lambo and invites suspicion. Dennis whisks Charlie away - they're late for the meeting. Inside, they find one elevator under repair - shit! They're really going to be late.

3. Dimitri enters office to discover he's under investigation. Watches his stock tumbling into the crapper - he's ruined, and will probably go to jail. Jokes about going to Club Fed. Asks for a few moments to gather his things, hastily (and surreptitiously) drops envelope into building tube mail to Charlie.

4. Charlie confronts Dennis on way to teleconference with German conglomerate who are

set to buy Earwig. Dennis denies insider trading. Teleconference goes well but Germans mention concerns about possible lawsuit.

Dennis assures them this is pure speculation. After, Charlie is freaking out - what else has Dennis hidden from him? When they get to his office, they find Travis & posse waiting.

5. Dimitri asks not to be cuffed when they lead him out of building. Caitlyn feels sorry for him and removes them. When they go to elevator, Dimitri sees his "door opening up" - an empty shaft 70 floors down - and takes it, stepping off to his death.

6. Travis confronts Charlie and Dennis about stealing his song, and Charlie almost has Travis calmed down when Dennis' phone rings and its ringtone is Travis' song "Gettin' Paid." Travis goes ballistic, destroys Charlie's ship-in-a-bottle and Charlie calls security. They tell him there'll be a delay due to the mess downstairs.

7. Security, Travis and Charlie exit the elevator to find the coroner and cops dealing with Dimitri's suicide. Caitlyn is distraught, and when Charlie hears what happens he finds himself blaming her. A page hands him the envelope Dimitri sent.

Charlie goes outside to be alone, and read it. It's a note telling Charlie Dimitri hopes he didn't cheat on their agreement about the ledge - and the key to Dimitri's Benz.

8. At home, Charlie is distraught, but Ursula is only concerned whether they can actually keep the Benz as a "gift". Charlie is more worried whether Caitlyn was right about the insider trading info, which the SEC would already have found on Dimitri's computers. Earwig would be under investigation for sure, then.

Charlie gets a call from a drunk Caitlyn begging his forgiveness, and he makes an excuse to go "meet Dennis" to pick her up from a bar and drive her home. When Charlie leaves, Dennis slips into his house - we learn Dennis and Ursula are having an affair, and he assures her that it doesn't matter if the SEC busts in there tomorrow - everything has been "taken care of."

9. Charlie meets a weepy drunk Caitlyn, feeling sorry and blaming herself for Dimitri's death. Charlie forgives her, but the more she blabs about Earwig the more he gets concerned. Instead of driving her home, he stops off at the office to go over the files, dumping a passed-out

Caitlyn on his office couch.

Sure enough, the records show Dennis is up to something, but Charlie can't figure out what. Caitlyn assures him she can help. She asks him about the shattered boat model, and he explains it's a replica of his and Dennis' dad's boat. It feels like an omen to him - he's going to metaphorically pick up the pieces of this mess, and it's going to be all right.

He realizes the sun is coming up, so he walks Caitlyn out, to sneak her out of the building before anyone shows up for work.

10. When they get downstairs, Caitlyn's superior at the SEC is waiting with the cops. She's removed from the case, and Charlie is cuffed and taken away. The SEC swarms into Earwig's offices and confiscate everything.

11. Charlie finds out his accounts have been wiped out, so all he can manage is a court-appointed lawyer, who is woefully unprepared to handle the case. Dennis, in the meantime, hires a "Dream Team" staff of lawyers.

Caitlyn comes to visit Charlie, but can't even help him make bail. While she's there, Ursula's lawyer (happens to be Dennis' as well!) serves Charlie with divorce papers. Charlie wishes he had a ledge now, but there isn't one in sight.

12. Charlie can't account for all the missing money, though it appears he had equal involvement in Earwig's affairs, so he is sentenced to Starke Prison, while Dennis (with his equal culpability but fabulous legal aid) is sentenced to Pensacola Prison (the new Club Fed).

The two experiences are humorously intercut between cutthroat and cupcake. Charlie falls in with Knox, the "anti-Morgan Freeman from *Shawshank*", a guy who isn't a kindly lifer, but a kind of amoral ass who nonetheless realizes Charlie is not meant to be there at all. He steers Charlie to Griffey as a shakedown opportunity on a white-collar guy who is probably harboring a lot of dough.

13. Travis sees his chance for the lawsuit disappear so he turns to revenge, and arranges for a hit on Charlie and Dennis in prison. Dennis' "hitman" is a Club Fed pussy and thus the plan is easily thwarted, but Charlie is facing real menace.

Charlie is saved by the shady guard Griffey, who now expects to be put on the payroll somehow. Charlie has to come up with some payment

or he'll be a sitting duck.

14. After the thwarted "hit" Dennis is told he has a visitor, and when he sees Caitlyn it's clear he was expecting someone else. Caitlyn wants Dennis to come clean about the money to help Charlie, maybe take the heat off him from Travis or even get him transferred or released, and he refuses.

Caitlyn is suspicious of how Dennis acted when he saw her, so she waits and observes Ursula visit Dennis soon after. Caitlyn follows Ursula and realizes she's making travel arrangements for The Cayman Islands. She puts two and two together and tells the SEC, but gets reprimanded, as she's on suspension, and has a clear conflict of interest with Charlie.

In the end, she tells Charlie, but he knows she's powerless to do anything.

Act Two

15. Charlie hatches a scheme to break out of Starke. He recruits his only two allies, Knox and Griffey, even though he knows he can't trust them. Charlie has Griffey smuggle in black ink to dye Charlie's prison clothes black, and they'll walk out of there a priest giving last rites to Knox the "death row" inmate.

Unbeknownst to Charlie, Griffey mistakenly gets water-based ink.

16. Charlie executes his escape as a blinding thunderstorm rages outside. It goes perfect until they get near a critical gate to the outside (and the wall of rain), and as Charlie sweats he discovers the ink is running. He makes a mad dash through a hail of gunfire as his costume color melts.

At the last second, Griffey steps in and makes it work with guns and muscle. Charlie gets away, but has a new partner - the violent redneck Griffey.

17. Dennis gets word of Charlie's escape, and when he tries to contact Ursula she inadvertently gives away her location in Grand Cayman. Dennis knows she can only be there is she's trying to take the money, and now wonders if she's working with Charlie in some kind of double-cross.

He "busts out" of Club Fed, which really amounts to walking out.

18. Caitlyn gets hauled in by the cops, since she's been in contact with both brothers and now they're on the run. Piecing together clues from

her interrogators, she realizes what Charlie must be up to, is probably headed for the dad's boat, and rather than simply give him up to her colleagues who have scorned and devalued her, she escapes to find him (and some redemption) herself.

19. Travis sees Charlie's escape on the news, and becomes totally psychotic with rage. He has his homeys in Starke put the squeeze on Knox, and though he resists (he had begrudgingly developed a soft spot for nice-guy Charlie) he eventually gives up his destination. Travis hauls ass in pursuit.

20. On Grand Cayman, Ursula tries to make a cash withdrawal, but discovers she has to wait until Monday, when the banks open. The clock is ticking now: Charlie only has three days to make it to the bank before her.

Since this is from Charlie and Dennis' corporate offices, only these three people can claim the money: Charlie, Dennis, or Ursula (being Charlie's spouse - until the divorce).

21. Trying to escape across a swamp filled with alligators, Charlie manages to pull off the "Live and Let Die" leap across the gators' backs - until, halfway across the sluice, Griffey starts blasting the gators with his pistol, leaving Charlie with the very real possibility that his "bridge" of gators will wind up sinking into the swamp before he can leap across to safety.

He barely makes it across, and vows to ditch Griffey at the first available opportunity.

22. Dennis winds up stuck in a roadblock, and realizes they're looking for him and Charlie. He panics. The cops move ever closer, car-to-car, and he scoots to the passenger side, hand on the handle looking for his moment to bolt into the woods.

A few cars up, the cops search a Bentley, and find it's driven by Travis. They're big fans, and Travis is Mr. Smooth, allowing them to pop the trunk, etc., as he has nothing to hide. The cops get distracted, asking for autographs and pics, and Dennis slips inside the Bentley trunk and pulls a golf bag over him. They slam the trunk without seeing him and he thinks he's set.

One of the cops' phones rings, and you guessed it - the ringtone is "Gettin' Paid". Travis goes nuts, and the cops freak out, drawing weapons. Dennis is shitting on himself, only hearing this from the trunk.

Amid a hail of gunfire, Travis burns rubber

away from the roadblock, the cops in pursuit, Dennis in the trunk.

23. Griffey is getting increasingly bossy, and Charlie isn't sure how he'll get out of it, when they come out of the woods to his find (ruh roh) his dad's decrepit old boat. As they step on board, Caitlyn pops up from below deck, all cheery, getting the piece of shit boat ready to sail.

Griffey pulls his pistol, super paranoid, but Charlie and Caitlyn bullshit him into believing she's just a loyal secretary Charlie sent word to, who's along to help out. When they get alone, Charlie and Caitlyn share a terse conversation about what the hell's going on. They agree that until they can get rid of Griffey they're locked in, so they set about casting off.

After siphoning some fuel from a nearby diesel truck, they get the motor running and chug out into the Gulf of Mexico.

24. Travis and Dennis screech to a halt by a swanky marina, sirens not far away in the distance. Travis gets out to steal a boat, uzi in hand, and pops the trunk to grab some ammo. He finds Dennis, and it's a dream come true.

He's about to blast Dennis to Hell when Dennis convinces him through sheer brilliant bullshitting ability that he would be better off with the money - he could always kill Dennis later, and maybe pop a cap in Charlie, to boot.

Travis agrees and he and Dennis steal a fast Gulf-worthy speedboat, and speed off just before the cops arrive.

25. Charlie is busy trying to steer the boat and look through maps while Caitlyn is caked with grease down below, trying to keep the smoking engine from exploding. Griffey has managed to find a bottle of whiskey, and starts polishing it off as he keeps them hopping with the gun.

While they are distracted, and he noses around for more booze, he comes across Caitlyn's purse from its hiding spot. He figures out he's being played and rushes on deck to confront them.

Caitlyn and Charlie are waiting for him and knock his ass overboard with a wild swinging jib. The boat chugs away as Griffey splashes about in the Gulf.

26. Ursula, looking like \$200 million bucks, is downing Cosmos at Grand Cayman bar when she runs into the offshore bank manager. She seizes the opportunity to put the serious seduction on him, and he seems more than willing to be used by her.

It's looking like she may fuck her way into an early withdrawal.

27. Charlie and Caitlyn are finally alone, and share a moment as they find themselves smack in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico en route to the Cayman Islands on this crazy adventure. Charlie gets Caitlyn to admit she's at least partly responsible for all this, but she gets him to face the reality that there's little chance that it's going to work out well in the end.

Charlie realizes it's the first time he's felt alive in years, and they make a promise to get the money first, and decide what to do then. Everything seems to be working out, and they make out, not realizing the engine is disintegrating without their constant attention.

28. Travis abuses Dennis as they zip across the Gulf. They spot something in the water, and Travis demands they leave it and stay focused, but Dennis convinces him that their dad's piece of shit boat could well have sunk, and this could be Charlie - sweet revenge time.

They pull up to discover Griffey treading water and cursing. Travis recognizes Griffey from news reports on TV, and they haul him in. Griffey tries to take charge, but Travis has the uzi, and he doesn't like it a bit. He's also an avowed hater of rap music.

Now Travis has two crackas to abuse, and they head off at top speed after Charlie and Caitlyn.

29. The motor blows up on Charlie's dad's boat, and he and Caitlyn rush out of bed to see what the damage is. It's totaled. Charlie asks if Caitlyn knows how to sail, but she's never sailed anything this big.

They go up on deck to try and figure it out, only to find Travis, Griffey and Dennis pulling alongside.

Act Three

30. Travis takes command of the boat, only to discover it's dead in the water. They decide to wait until morning, and Travis takes the keys from the speedboat and ties it on a long rope to the back of Charlie's dad's boat.

He sticks Charlie and Dennis on the speedboat in tow, and posts Griffey on watch. He's going to take Caitlyn below deck and have his way with her.

31. In the moonlight, Ursula lies beside a

naked, sweaty, rotund bank manager, watching the clock, praying for morning to come soon. The manager is only catching his breath, however, and rolls back over on top of her, eclipsing her naked body.

On board Charlie's dad's boat, Travis tries to come across as more of a playa than a rapist, and Caitlyn makes him think he's getting somewhere. When his guard is down, she clocks him and takes the uzi.

32. Charlie and Dennis watch the sailboat from the towed speedboat. Charlie is freaking out because of what he imagines is happening to Caitlyn. He's furious with Dennis, and to his surprise, Dennis tells him he deserves all of Charlie's anger.

Dennis knows he fucked up, and comes clean about Ursula. All the experiences with Travis and Griffey have made him realize he's a shitbag, and not cut out for a life of crime. He just wishes there were some way to make it up to Charlie.

Charlie tells him there is - they're going to climb up that rope and rush Griffey, and save Caitlyn. They start up the rope.

33. On board the big sailboat, Griffey is passed out from more whiskey, but he's propped up in such a way that it looks like he's awake. Charlie and Dennis make it on board looking more like a couple of drowned rats than sailor-ninjas, but summon up the courage to rush Griffey.

Just as they make a move, Caitlyn comes up from below deck with the uzi, scaring the shit out of them, and waking Griffey. Charlie, Caitlyn and Dennis take control of the boat.

34. As the sun is rising, Charlie, Caitlyn and Dennis leave Travis and Griffey tied to the mast of the sailboat together and zoom off to Grand Cayman in the speedboat.

As Travis and Griffey wait to be picked up (eventually) by the Coast Guard, they bitch and blame each other for fucking the whole plan. Off in the distance, Dennis makes a phone call - he's taken Travis' phone, and left his own in Travis' pocket. "Gettin' Paid" plays on and on, as Travis and Griffey squirm.

35. Dennis, Charlie and Caitlyn make it to Grand Cayman, only to discover the authorities waiting on them. As Caitlyn tries to use her credentials to explain why she's there, Charlie grabs the uzi and makes it appear she's been a hostage the whole time.

Caitlyn tries to tell the Cayman police the

truth, but they aren't buying it. Charlie and Dennis escape in the speedboat, and run it aground after a chase by the Coast Guard and Cayman Marine authorities.

On foot, Charlie and Dennis race to the bank.

36. Charlie and Dennis arrive and rush to the manager. Breathless, they make their case to withdraw the money, but he explains he is a stickler for regulations, and the money has already been withdrawn.

We expect to see Ursula with the money, but we see her back in the hotel, snoring. Charlie and Dennis leave the bank, feeling like the whole escapade has been for nothing, when they discover Caitlyn waiting for them outside with the cash.

Sirens are approaching in the distance. She puts it to Charlie - what is he going to do? He knows if he runs, she will go to prison as an accomplice. What if she comes with him? The sirens are getting closer.

We don't know it yet, but Charlie gives back the money. He'll have to go back to prison in some way, but you get a kind of fun fake-out with the following ending:

37. Charlie and Dennis look tanned and rested in Hawaiian shirts, playing tennis. We assume they are off on their getaway. Just then, a guard appears, and tells Charlie he has a visitor.

They're back in prison, only now Charlie is in Club Fed. Caitlyn has come to visit him, reinstated in the SEC since she recaptured all the money. She'll be waiting for him when he gets out, and has a present for him: a little piece of the sailcloth from his dad's old boat. Charlie finally has time to finish his model.

Ah, where to begin on this incarnation: if you read the final first draft, this is quite close in many ways, but it's hamstrung by various issues. The changes to Charlie and Dennis made it better, but it only exposed other cancerous portions of the beast. The embodiment of this, the biggest obstacle to success in

this draft, was the character of Dimitri. Why even include this suicidal nutbag? Dimitri was supposed to be what Charlie *could have* become, if he chose the wrong path. But who cares? He was a drag.

I felt it was imperative that I set up Charlie's old world at this point; I kept thinking I simultaneously needed to explain the vagaries of "insider trading" to the audience, and introduce characters like Dimitri and Caitlyn in segregated moments, under a kind of spotlight, to cement the relationships. I was still overthinking so much of the first act. Too many characters, and too much misdirection was the result. How important was Dimitri? Would it have been worth it if his death had been shown to be a fake, as planned, later on - I doubt it. It looked like a downer, his interaction with Charlie took up precious time away from Dennis and Caitlyn, and just when the first act needed to fly, it dragged.

To pick up the pace, I realized (as usual, the hard way) it would take some compression to make it read less like a slow train to Exposition City and more like a real, vibrant story. There was no need for Dimitri, and why begin on the street, only to have to transport Charlie and Dennis to the big meeting? (It eventually became Charlie's "worst-possible day" at the

office, and fit neatly into one reel, ending on the inciting incident, but I had to wise up to see it.)

All I *really* needed was to simplify the opening, have *it* do the heavy lifting, and never forget that every time people appeared or spoke, it was to advance the story AND reveal character. It was easy, once I lost Dimitri. I didn't need elaborate explanations to show how much conflict was waiting for my characters; I just needed to slam them together and throw rocks at them. It became my mantra that the rocks had to keep flying. I was beginning to dread workshop, however, because all those rocks seemed to be smashing into my gray matter, wrecking my work, week after week.

In all fairness, the time wasn't wasted by any means, because the work was spent shoring up the structure, not pushing false "progress" into pages in fits and starts. In hindsight, I can see much of the anxiety I felt to get to those first pages was due to the inherent fifteen-week structure of the class.

By this point in the writing of *Club Fed*, the "Spring Break" division in the workshop was looming (quotes because I wasn't blazing off on any Margarita-fueled road trip to Corpus - I had to write like *Perra del Diablo* to make my deadlines now), and for me, this was a critical juncture: if I didn't turn in acceptable

pages the week before we took a break, I wouldn't get feedback until two weeks later. I'd be writing all the while in a black hole. Therefore, to my reckoning, much of that time would so much useless typing if I were on the wrong track. Instead, thank Xenu, I got overwhelming support for the new changes. Now, I just had to write those elusive pages...

This, ultimately, was one of those points in the writing of *Club Fed* where my old process contrasted sharply with the lessons I'd learned at UT. Out of habit, my first impulse was to forge ahead, in a more or less linear fashion, to tell the beginning, middle and end as I'd imagined it in the step outline. This isn't wrong in and of itself, there's good reason few scripts slice and dice time *Memento*-style. You can't fight it - that whole three-act business is simply hard-wired in our brains to that Aristotelian boogie; the trick is really about finding what constitutes the best elements to incorporate into each act.

Sadly (for my pride), this is not always what I think it should be; the writer has no special jurisdiction over what works for his/her audience. Just as with the character shift, and the countless revisions to the outlines, I had to realize I didn't yet know how to begin my script, even though I thought

I *finally* had a serviceable first act. There is no "trick" as you well know; it's just more work.

I was reminded of a profound piece of instruction I'd been given in Stuart's Writing for Television class the year before. I'd built a kind of funnel in my spec script, leading to a central conflict I felt I had to "save" until the right time at the top of the third act (mine was a three-act structure, cable affair, none of this four-act network madness). Stuart was having none of it; in so many words, he asked what the hell was I waiting for? By pussyfooting around, waiting for some big "moment" where things could come to a head, I'd squandered twenty pages that could have benefitted from that conflict, fueling tension, humor, etc.

The scales fell from my eyes, as they say in that colorful Yahweh way. When I rewrote my spec, I foregrounded the conflict, pushed everything I'd had thus far into the first act. It transformed the spec, gave it a much-needed jolt of energy. It was perhaps a less explosive version of Hitchcock's Bomb Theory: if you detonate a bomb in a scene, you get maybe ten seconds of tension. If you tell an audience a bomb is going to go off, you can milk that tension for ten minutes. I just needed to light a fuse.

Since I now had a new, transmuted Charlie, as a protagonist, it gave me the freedom to shake up the

opening scenes. He had become a wholly sympathetic character, so I could hurl those rocks at him with abandon; the audience was, in theory, going to side with his plight from the start, and I wouldn't have to build up a complex reason for the audience to follow a dastardly, unsympathetic lead. I could open the script in a non-linear fashion, then flash back to the chronological beginning of the narrative, *in media res*.

I reached into the chronological end of the first act, where the stakes had really started to climb, and looked for scenes with the sharpest punch. When the would-be assassin Le Tigre chases Charlie to the prison mailroom, only to get killed himself by a file in a cake, I figured I had a scene with all the elements I was looking for: fast-paced visual action, dark humor to set the tone, and the biggest shift from the status quo world.

And, on the subject of tone, I knew the opening scene is critical in setting up the audience for the film they're about to watch. One of the best lessons from Alex Smith's class was on this very subject. Alex showed us the first ten minutes of several great movies, *Rumble Fish*, *The Limey*, some a few of us had seen, some more obscure. We didn't get to see the rest of the film, because Alex wanted us to guess what that unseen footage might contain. It was amazing how much

of a feel for a film you can pack into the opening reel; it made me think a companion lesson might involve viewing some opening ten minutes that didn't work.

My assumption was with *Club Fed* that, if the reader got the dark joke in the opener with Le Tigre, they'd not only understand the humor but also be invested with Charlie the rest of the way. I thought there was a distinct difference between the death of Le Tigre (self-defense from a psychotic assassin) and Dimitri's suicide (just f-ing sad). Also, it was never going to get quite that violent again (Le Tigre is the only character that dies, and even *he* gets resurrected, in a way) and the violence that does occur is all bordering on slapstick. In a way, the very same beat happens with the death of Damien Cockburn early in *Tropic Thunder*. You're told very quickly in that film you're getting an *action-comedy*, and I tried to deliver both sides of that coin as well.

When I returned from Spring Break, I had my first act. Some of my cohort had actually made it to forty, fifty pages or so, but I knew that if I had my first twenty-five to thirty pages in place, I could keep up with my weekly deadlines (the class goal was ten pages, but for myself, I set twelve pages) and finish the semester with a completed feature. That was indeed the

case, and the rest of the pages fell into line, with some minor fixes and revisions along the way.

I was intrigued to observe, as the semester rolled on, that a few of the folks who had raced ahead in pages seemed to stall out. I was a little grateful, then, that I had spent so much time going over the structure of the plot again and again, because it never felt so shaky that I couldn't make steady progress. I had to make a dash for the finish line of about twenty pages, but that always seems to be child's play at the end of the semester. I suppose you're in "the zone", because the opposite is also true - I know if I haven't written anything in a while, pages move about as fast as a rusty plow disintegrating in a cornfield.

I was especially glad I had finished in time for our last workshop, because it gave my cohort, and Richard, one last chance to read the script to FADE OUT before the final class. I originally wrote the dénouement as a sequence beginning with the reveal of Charlie, Knox and Caitlyn at Club Fed, then Griffey in his banishment, moving then to Dennis at Starke - with the final joke beat being Le Puma's pursuit of Travis. I suppose I was in a hurry to reach a catharsis, beginning with Charlie first, and end on a bookend beat similar to the opening, but it felt emotionally flat.

When we met for our final class, I received one of the best suggestions of the semester, and it was resolved almost entirely with a cut-and-paste: my classmates pointed out that I should delay the reveal of Club Fed, so I could fool the audience a wee bit longer. I took another look at it, and they were so right. I cut the scene with Charlie and Knox in half, so that the faux "island" section stands alone. The following sections are the same as before, except after Travis and Le Puma, we return to Club Fed. When it fell into the new order, the last beat belonged to Charlie and Caitlyn, with her offering him a key. This is a much more emotionally satisfying beat, and I almost missed it.

I can't say enough how invaluable the feedback was I got from Richard and my cohort through this entire process. There is no substitute for having other eyes on your writing, especially when those readers are people you know and trust. This was driven home for me when, late in the semester, we were allowed to pitch our scripts to Richard's writing partner Chad Keller (UT grad, now at Paramount and formerly Screen Gems). As I spewed out my cast of crazed characters, and their twisted situations, Chad thought my plot was so complex the script would end up a mini-series. I assured him it was coming in under 110 pages. After class, one of my

cohorts, Scott Miles, said Chad's comments made him realize how much I'd packed into so few pages, and that I'd pulled off something I should be proud of.

I think the end result was just the kind of script I was hoping to write; if so, much of its success depended on the continued pressure, sympathy and support from Richard and my workshop partners to help me keep making it better.

Chapter Three: Looking Back on UT

"No matter where you go, there you are." - Gandhi, er,
Buckaroo Banzai

I came into the MFA program with certain pre-conceived notions. In most ways, UT met or exceeded my expectations, but looking back I feel there are also areas that could better serve the student, and the school.

I'll divide my impressions of UT as a whole into three categories: the classes (assigned and elective), the teaching assistant experience, and what I suppose you could call the "end game", preparing the MFA student for a post-grad jump into the abyss (aka "career").

Classes

My cohort came into our first semester in a unique position, as far as I know: both Stuart and Richard were unavailable for the RTF380J course for the fall. Alex Smith taught this class, and thus introduced us to the MFA program. While he did an excellent job, we seem to have missed out on some of the benefits of having Stuart for RTF380J, as did the 1st Years that came behind us. The upside of this was that our cohort banded together for mutual support, something that gave us solidarity the entire two years, and it is my understanding that this is not always the case.

One of the indelible lessons Alex taught us was how mythic structure can inform our screenwriting choices, with elements such as the hero's journey, archetypes from folklore, graphic novels, etc. As mentioned before, he also made great use of script and film examples to drive home the crucial importance of the first ten pages of the script, leading to the inciting incident.

Looking back, however, I was somewhat disappointed with the two semesters of RTF380J; I mention this mainly because we were married to these first scripts for a *long* time (our entire first year), yet in some ways we felt rushed, and made weak foundations work (or

not, as the case may be) for scripts that most of us wound up growing dissatisfied with.

Only part of that has to do with Alex, some was on us and some was due to his time management in the first two or three weeks of the course; it was really more about a sort of schizophrenic feeling that resulted from the pairing of Alex in the first semester with Kathleen Orillion in the second. The two teaching styles could *not* have been more different, hands-on vs. hands-off. I did like the way Ms. Orillion began each workshop with the phrase "What's working?" and when we were done with some brief praise, she'd say, "What's not working?" But that was literally the extent of her contribution to the class.

The consensus seemed to be among us that many of us felt adrift in the second semester. Some of us finished our scripts, some didn't. It's not that we got off on the wrong foot, exactly, but whatever it was, it made it difficult to stick our landing on the back end.

On the flip side, the companion RTF class for our first semester was Charles Ramirez-Berg's History of Film; this was one of my favorite classes of any I took at UT. *Please* keep this as a required course, as I feel this is key to success in the rest of the program; I was shocked to learn, early on, that not everyone in film school is versed in film grammar, and as a

consequence they have little background by which to offer meaningful criticism in workshop.

In the spring, Stuart's Writing for Television class was a revelation. He had asked us at Orientation if any of the incoming writers had aspirations to write for TV, and most of us said no. He predicted he would change our minds about television, and damned if he didn't do just that. I enjoyed everything about it. Stuart struck a great balance with lecture and examples, and workshop. In contrast with our feature experience, nearly everyone in the TV class turned out work they were excited about that first year.

The next fall, we had Bob Foshko for 380M and Steven Dietz for Adaptation. Of the two, Adaptation seemed to be the steeper learning curve for most of us, but in both courses we were paired with Production students, which made for an interesting dynamic. There is one aspect to the Foshko class I feel is worth mentioning: Foshko began the class with no workshop component - we found this to be quite strange, as we had come to depend on the feedback and group interaction from the year before. Bob was very gracious at integrating in a truncated workshop for us, while still leaving time for the films he wanted to show and discuss.

The biggest insight I gained from Adaptation was in learning how to break a story into components that function efficiently in a script. We used the whiteboard in almost every class, and constructed elaborate timelines for each of our plots. We turned some muddy messes into well-oiled machines, and I feel like Dietz gave us some valuable tools to work with.

Everything seemed to click in our last semester. Richard's RTF380M class was a phenomenal learning experience, and, in a different yet complimentary manner, so was Scott Rice's Rewriting class. An aside about the Rice class: it's my understanding that this will no longer be offered to 2nd Year writers, and I feel this is a mistake. Had we perhaps been able to take rewriting in the fall of our 2nd year, and Adaptation the next spring, I feel our work would have benefitted substantially.

I probably worked harder in Richard's class than at any other time at UT, and saying "that's a good thing" is a massive understatement. I can't speak for my cohort, but I felt the class was firing on all cylinders; maybe we had coalesced as a workshop-unit, maybe Richard just brought out better, more probing questions from the group, but I think we hammered our scripts into stronger shape than they would have been in any other class.

The Rice Rewriting class was also invaluable in facilitating a look back and deep within scripts that we had fooled ourselves into thinking we knew. Many of our cohort conversations after Scott's class returned to the refrain that we wished we'd had such a class earlier. If there were any way to incorporate this material in the first year, or early in the second, even as a component of another class, I think future UT screenwriting MFAs would produce FAR better work as a result.

I can completely understand the RTF proscription on screenwriters taking Production classes; anyone who has had weeks of their life sucked dry while trying to produce a short film should readily admit that any writing attempted during the same time would suffer. Having said that, I feel one of the best choices I made at UT for an elective class was Richard Lewis' Producing class. Forgive the hyperbole, but it was like an atomic bomb of knowledge about the motion picture industry in the real world. **THIS CLASS SHOULD BE REQUIRED** of all MFA screenwriters! Enough said.

Some parting general impressions:

I took Stuart's advice and made English my Minor, and enjoyed some fantastic classes. Don Graham's "Life

and Literature of the Southwest" is another of those classes that every UT student should take; it was worth it for the exposure to Katherine Ann Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* alone, but there were so many other great books. Elizabeth Richmond-Garza was like a force of nature in her class on Vampires in Imperial Literature; she allowed me to write a short script as my final paper, and under her spell it was one of the most gleefully terrifying things I ever hatched. Andy Garrison's East Austin Stories doc class was my sole brush with UT Production, and it was another rewarding experience. If there were one class I would repeat at UT, it might be this one.

As an overarching note covering all the semesters, I think it is a smart move to have the MFA cohort grade the quality/quantity of feedback they are given in workshop. It was such a mixed bag, I came to have a love-hate relationship with the process. This should come as no earth-shattering revelation, but as the semester drags on, many of the students skim or skip reading the pages turned in by their classmates. They offer little or no feedback.

Perhaps professors should require the students to submit the feedback on Blackboard, or at least make discussion of the feedback an active part of the

workshop. While this might not improve the quality, it would at least put the fear of God into the slack contingent, and force them to read submissions in a timely manner. When the workshop dynamic *is* working, honestly, there is no substitute for the enormously positive contribution it makes to the writing process.

TA Experience

My two semesters as a Teaching Assistant at UT were quite positive; in no small part by having the opportunity to sit in on the Intro to Screenwriting class lectures from Richard and Stuart at the same time as the students. I have no doubt I am a better writer simply from this aspect of the TA gig, but I also learned something every section from my students as we discussed their scripts and tried to find solutions to problems that could plague any writer, beginner or veteran.

My main regret is that it took me a while to get comfortable in first TA section, with Richard's class, though it seemed to serve as a sort of trial-by-fire that made it possible for Stuart's section the next semester to be a breeze. Even though I had taken a GTA course at UA through the McNair Scholars Program, it consisted mainly of teaching a ten-minute "class" in front of a crowd of similarly naïve undergrads in my same position. The real thing was a little more intimidating.

I recall Stephanie Crouch remarking that a GTA course or seminar was available, but none of us attended, as it was "optional". Maybe that GTA training should be mandatory; what would also help, in my

opinion, would be to devote perhaps two seminar days, the spring semester before the first TA fall, to having the seven TAs lead discussion. Even if it were no more than half an hour, it would give the prospective TAs a chance to find out what works, and what doesn't, while they're at the helm. Just a thought.

One other interesting difference between the two TA semesters was the timeline for student assignments. Stuart's class began with a feature, moved to TV, and then ended with a short. Richard's structure was basically the opposite. The benefit of doing it Stuart's way was that the workload (for us, and the students) diminished as the semester progressed.

The problem, for me, seems to lie in the students' perception of how each assignment builds on the next. Though Richard's process meant each TA had to grade a dozen first acts at semester's end, an aspirin-bottle-drainer in itself, there's a kind of ramping logic in the scope of each assignment. The students in Stuart's class expressed that they didn't feel quite as prepared to tackle the feature first acts so early in the semester, though page-wise it was no different from the next. Even so, it all worked out, as I encouraged my students in Stuart's section to enter some screenplay competitions; this gave the handful that did more time to finish and get feedback before submitting them.

The End Game

News Flash: I want to be a working writer. This was always my dream, and while I can now appreciate a teaching gig as a noble, fulfilling and possibly lucrative career goal (Governator Schwarzhisname willing), I would still pursue it with an eye towards being the day job that allowed me to huckster scripts around the studios. That may not be the case for everyone, but for those like me it makes the internship requirement of the MFA even more essential - how else is a student gong to get real-world experience, make contacts, etc.? Having said that, the system in place for the intern requirements for the MFA Screenwriting track at UT leaves a lot to be desired.

I understand the Tower necessity of having the writers work at an internship simply to satisfy the added component of the degree beyond the MA. I was told there was a lot of "flexibility", implying that almost any internship would do. I'm not trying to belittle this as an academic formality. In the final analysis, like the title of Rick Linklater's first film says, "It's impossible to learn to plow by reading books." But there's Old MacDonald, and then there's ConAgra.

I was told by everyone with experience at UT that if you want to work in the film industry, you can't

break in without coming to Los Angeles. I can see the prohibitive cost for some students, but it's done on an undergraduate level with the UTLA program every year. We saw countless promotional videos for UTLA, but my cohort consensus was that it seemed like a bit of a waste of time and money for grad students: why pay to live in a dorm (especially as many of us were married), and take undergrad classes?

Stephanie Crouch, of course, went above and beyond in patiently taking time to help me as I did my own legwork. My wife, who has taught Master's-level social workers for years, was astonished when she learned how RTF MFA internships operated. The School Of Social Work employs a full-time staff devoted to placing students in internships, and monitoring their progress. In RTF you're on your own. After a lot of hair-pulling, piggy-backing on Harvard's Cali job list and calling friends and UT grads for favors, I landed an internship at Miramax Films this summer.

At Miramax, most of the other interns are from the Stark School at USC. Of course, being one of the first institutions that comes to mind when the very *concept* of film school is discussed means USC had *better* have some sort of machinery in place to facilitate kick-ass internships. But if all the hype surrounding UT being

the "third-coast" film school is true, and I believe it is, shouldn't UT have such a system in place?

The upside - and it's a **BIG** upside - of having a grad-level internship at a place like Miramax, is that I have learned a *phenomenal* amount about what really goes on in the development of a script into a film. I work in the office of Mike Falbo, Director of Development. Ground Zero, baby. There are perhaps twenty people, counting myself, in the entire West Coast Miramax operation, and that includes half a dozen employees down the hall in the Publicity wing.

I've coordinated meetings with Oscar-winning directors and writers; I've read scripts in various stages of development, written basic coverage and comparative coverage of evolving drafts for the LA as well as New York offices. I've watched and discussed dailies of films in current production. I am encouraged to read articles and books and pitch ideas for scripts. I am responsible for helping digitize a massive script library, for every project that has passed through Miramax - some of which the studio made, some they passed on that were made into great movies at other studios, and some gems that are floating in limbo, that I have access to read and learn from.

As an employee of not only Miramax but its parent corporation, Disney, I have had the opportunity to go

to Disney Studios and hear presentations from executives like Dick Cook. At one such occasion, we were shown exclusive footage of upcoming films, some no more than animated storyboards, some mere experimental proof-of-concept sequences that may never again be seen in public. I've talked with interns in Disney's gaming division, about the exciting 3-D work being done there.

Sure, I've had to make the requisite Starbuck's run, and I can tell you where to buy the absolute *best* cupcakes in Beverly Hills (Sprinkles), but that's a small part of the experience. I applied at Paramount, and had I worked there, I'm afraid I would have been lost in the shuffle. I applied at J.K Livin', Matthew McConaughey's company, but it was so small, I would have probably wound up staring at surfboards on a wall all day. I think with persistence and a bit of luck, I found the perfect balance of those factors to put me close to the real action, film development.

The other interns, the Stark kids, are going to go on to great things, I'm sure of it, and it makes me feel like I'm part of some incoming wave of filmmakers. Every day, I'm proud to be only person from Texas in the place, a guy they took a chance on because they were intrigued what UT had to offer.

Conclusion: A Lone Star State of Mind

"And as we were driving down the highway
She asked me, baby what's so great?
How come you're always going on
About your Lone Star State?"

- Lyle Lovett, "That's Right (You're Not From Texas)"

My time at UT rocketed by. I wish the screenwriting program could be longer, because even though I barely had time to appreciate the school and Austin, it already felt so much like *home*. That persistent magnetic pull to stay is part of the overall mystique, it seems - that old chestnut about how Austin is sometimes called the Velvet Coffin. It was hard to shake the charm of the city, and move away - maybe that's why some of my cohort chose otherwise, so they can enjoy that velvet crush for a few more years.

But sitting here in Los Angeles now, I don't know how I could have done it any other way. So many opportunities seem to be *out there* now - I just have to drive down this new avenue to reach them. Maybe LA isn't as velvety as Austin, by any means, but it definitely has its own magnetic pull. I miss Austin, but perhaps I can return in a few years, after this next adventure has run its course. I feel like I'm doing what my mentors at UT would want me to do, and I don't want to let them or myself down.

I can definitely say my writing has improved, if not wholly transformed through UT's MFA program. I have much more confidence in appreciating good writing in my own work and others, and I believe I have a clearer understanding of the screenwriter's role within "The Industry". While some of my illusions have dissipated, my dreams certainly haven't. My life was enriched by the people I met at UT, the classes I took, and the films, music, food and other wonders of the city. I am proud to say I was a part of The University of Texas.

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VITA

Kevin Jeffrey Pinkerton was born in Nashville, Tennessee on September 4th, 1965, the son of Walter Eugene and Mary Ellen Pinkerton. After completing his work at Sidney Lanier High School in Montgomery, Alabama, he briefly attended The University of Auburn at Montgomery, studying Commercial Art, before he moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he attended the fiction writing workshops at the Callanwolde Fine Arts School. He moved back to Alabama in 1994, and was employed as a mechanic for nearly a decade. Kevin returned to academia in 2003 to study Film Production and Creative Writing at The University of Alabama, earning his Bachelor of Arts four years later. In August of 2007 he entered The University of Texas Graduate School to pursue an MFA in Screenwriting. He is the author of six feature-length screenplays.

Permanent address: 1146 East 2nd Street
Long Beach, CA 90802

This report was typed by the author.